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Under Water within Thirty Years

The Prophetic Mode in *True Detective*

Isak Winkel Holm

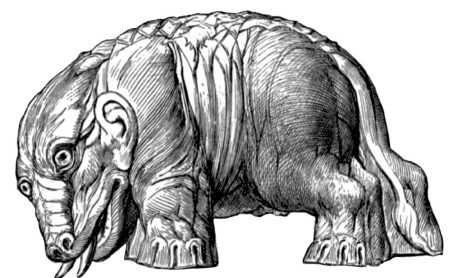
Abstract:

“Place is going to be under water within thirty years,” detective Rustin Cohle says while driving through a disaster-stricken landscape in south Louisiana in the mid 90’s. The first season of *True Detective*, a HBO crime series authored by Nic Pizzolatto and directed by Cary Fukunaga, is tensed on the verge of disaster. In grammatical terms, it depicts a social life in future perfect, a life that *will have been* above the surface. In this paper, I explore the prophetic as an aesthetic mode of *True Detective*. According to Maurice Blanchot, prophetic speech “is not just a future language. It is a dimension of language that engages it in relationships with time that are much more important than the simple discovery of certain events to come.” Following Blanchot, I define the aesthetic mode of the prophetic as a way of feeling, seeing and thinking that makes the viewer experience the fictional world in the shadow of a catastrophe to come. This prophetic mode, I contend, has important consequences for the show’s treatment of the question of justice. Like the prophetic books of the Old testament, *True Detective* shifts the perspective from the content of law to the force of law. Thus, focusing on the prophetic is a way of approaching a specific configuration of aesthetics, disaster, and justice.

Keywords, dt.: True Detective, Prophetie, Ästhetik, Krimi, Katastrophenforschung

Keywords, engl.: True Detective, prophecy, aesthetics, detective fiction, disaster research

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“Pipeline covering up this coast like a jigsaw. Place is going to be under water within thirty years.” The first season of *True Detective*, a HBO crime series authored by Nic Pizzolatto and directed by Cary Fukunaga, plays in a south Louisiana landscape devastated by violent hurricanes and monstrous oil extraction facilities. During the eight episodes of the show, we follow the two Louisiana State Police Detectives Martin Hart and Rustin Cohle (Woody Harrelson and Matthew McConaughey) on their endless car rides through a desolate Vermilion Parish investigating the murder of the female prostitute Dora Lange, killed by a satanic sex cult in 1995.

However, Rust Cohle’s remark about the disaster-stricken landscape not only refers to the traces of man-made and natural disasters which can be seen outside the car, in this case a coast cut up by petrochemical installations and a forest destroyed by Hurricane Andrew (E3 44). More importantly, it points toward a future disaster that is going to submerge the whole part of the state within thirty years. Cohle’s propensity for prophetic remarks contributes to the show’s “ominous” affective atmosphere: [1] as viewers, we experience the events of the show under the constant shadow of a catastrophe to come. Not by accident, the Dora Lange case is investigated in 1995 in a region that was hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, and by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010.

In what follows, I will explore what it means to maintain the order of justice in a place that is going to be under water within thirty years. How does the question of justice appear in the shadow of impending disaster? What is the relation between Cohle’s predictions of a coming catastrophe and his investigations of the injustice in south Louisiana? My contention is that in *True Detective* the looming presence of a catastrophe to come triggers a change of perspective from the content of law to the force of law: rather than questioning the substance of justice, the show explores the strength with which justice applies its ideas of order to a disorderly social life.

In the field of philosophy, the shadow of a catastrophe to come has been explored by the thinkers of nuclear and ecological disasters, first of all by Günther Anders, Hans Jonas, and, more recently, Jean-Pierre Dupuy. According to Dupuy, the catastrophic future that awaits us demands that we use the method of “enlightened doomsaying” which he defines as a “heuristics of fear” and an “interpretative attitude” that perceives the present world in the light of future disaster (Dupuy 2002, 92). According to Dupuy, enlightened doomsaying is “a philosophical attitude, a reversal of the metaphysical order in our ways of thinking the world and the time based on the temporality of catastrophes” (80).

Anders, Jonas, and Dupuy suggest the interpretative attitude of the prophet as a method, a secular political strategy for preventing environmental catastrophe. In a work of fiction like *True Detective*, on the other hand, the prophetic is rather a stylistic feature that gives shape to the work. I suggest defining “the prophetic” as an aesthetic mode: a way of feeling, seeing and thinking that orchestrates the viewer’s experience of the fictional world. If a “prophet” is a human being who predicts the future and if a “prophecy” is his or her linguistic message about the future, then “the prophetic” can be defined as

[1] See for instance (Nussbaum 2014).

an aesthetic mode that characterizes an entire work of art in which prophets or prophecies occur, in this case as a way of feeling, seeing and thinking about south Louisiana as a place that will be flooded within thirty years. In the opening chapters of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, one of the classical works of prophetic fiction in American culture, the term "prophet" would refer to the beggar-like stranger Elijah whom the narrator and his comrade meet on the wharf before boarding ship; the term "prophecy" would designate his "ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing, shrouded sort of talk" (Melville 1963, chapter XIX). "The prophetic," finally, could be used as a term for the aesthetic quality of the whole novel created by the constant vague misgivings of a future shipwreck.

As opposed to the aesthetic modes of the tragic, the comic, and the elegiac, the prophetic mode is not well-researched in the fields of literary studies and aesthetic theory. In an important book, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (2002), however, Ian Balfour sets out to explore the prophetic mode in romantic literature: "It is usually more appropriate to speak of 'the prophetic' than of prophecy, if the latter is a genre and the former a mode that can intersect with any number of genres from the ode to the epic, in either poetry or prose" (Balfour 2002, 1). An important point of departure for Balfour's book—and for this article—is the French literary critic Maurice Blanchot's essay "Prophetic Speech" (or "The Prophetic Word", "La parole prophétique") originally published in 1957 and collected in a book suitably named *The Book to Come*. According to Blanchot, prophecy "is not just a future language. It is a dimension of language that engages it in relationships with time that are much more important than the simple discovery of certain events to come" (2003, 79). Thus, prophetic speech is not an individual message about the future but, rather, a "dimension of language," an "experience of the desert" (80), or, as I choose to put it, an aesthetic mode that represents the present moment in the light of the future disaster.

To be sure, disasters have a very tangible impact on the investigation of the Dora Lange case. In 1995, the case is investigated by Detectives Hart and Cohle; in 2012, however, the case is re-investigated by Detectives Maynard Gilbough and Thomas Papania (Michael Potts and Tory Kittles), who, in the first episode, legitimate their re-investigation by referring to a disaster: "Files got ruined. Hurricane Rita" (E1 39). In a later episode, reverend Billy Lee Tuttle, founder of Tuttle Ministries, a number of evangelical schools, and presumably one of the leaders of the sex cult, asserts that some of the vital files of the school were lost during Hurricane Katrina: "We did lose a lot of files; had some flooding in one of the subfloors" (E6 37). It seems as if disasters tend to impede Hart and Cohle's police investigation by ruining the archives of Vermilion Parish. Elsewhere, I have focused on the relation between archives and disasters in the show (Holm and Bjering 2016). In this article, I direct my attention toward the relation between justice and disasters: not the relation between justice and real disasters like Hurricane Rita and Hurricane Katrina, but, rather, the relation between justice and future disasters, a relation established through the aesthetic mode of the prophetic.

The temporality of catastrophes

Before coming to south Louisiana, Cohle spent four harrowing years as a deep undercover narcotics agent, and the neural damage caused by the drug addiction he developed during this assignment still makes him suffer from chemical flashbacks and dreamlike hallucinations. “You still see things?” Gilbough and Papania, the re-investigators of the Dora Lange case, ask him in the second episode of the show, named “Seeing Things” (E2 52). In reply to their question, Cohle reflects upon the truth content of his visions: “Back then, the visions ... most of the time I was convinced that I’d lost it. But there were other times, I thought I was mainlining the secret truth of the universe” (E2 56). In the prophetic books of the Old Testament, the prophet is called by God—Ezekiel, for instance, is forced to eat a book scroll and Isaiah is having his lips cleaned with a live coal—and this initial revelation of the secret truth of the universe is the source of the prophet’s divine authority. In *True Detective*, Cohle’s prophetic inspiration is a prophetic injection, as if the secret truth of the universe were some a kind of drug.

By himself and by his colleagues, Cohle is perceived as a prophetic figure, an ecstatic and charismatic outsider who predicts the future and provokes the powers that be. It is readily apparent that Cohle is a modernized and secularized version of a prophet. Even if Cohle is mainlining the secret truth of the universe, this truth is not the divine truth of a religious prophet but a more earthly truth about the political order of the state of Louisiana. As mentioned, however, my aim in this article is neither to identify Cohle as a prophet, nor to classify Cohle’s remarks as prophecies. Rather, it is to understand *True Detective* as prophetic: as a characterized by an aesthetic mode in which the viewer experiences the fictional in the shadow of the coming catastrophe.

According to Jean-Pierre Dupuy, the prophetic is characterized by a reversed temporality (2005, 13). The interpretive attitude of doomsaying “invites us to make an imaginative leap, to place ourselves by an act of mental projection in the moment following a future catastrophe and then, looking back toward the present time, to see catastrophe as our fate—only a fate that we may yet choose to avoid” (2013, 33). This combination of projection and retrospection, characteristic of the temporality of catastrophes, connects present and future in what Dupuy terms a temporal “loop.” More recently, the temporal loop of the prophetic has been called “retroprospection” (Szendy 2010, 29): a prospection to the impending disaster followed by a retrospection to the present moment.

This temporal loop is an important feature of the prophetic mode in *True Detective*. In the first episode, as Detectives Hart and Cohle leave the laboratory of the coroner in a desolate suburb after having examined the body of Dora Lange, Cohle is haunted by yet another prophetic vision: “This place is like somebody’s memory of a town, and the memory is fading. It’s like there was never anything here but jungle” (E1 29). By an act of mental projection, the vision places us in the moment following a future catastrophe, a time of reference in which the town is overgrown by jungle. But then, from the fictional disastrous future, an anonymous ‘somebody’ looks back toward the

present. Thanks to this temporal loop, Cohle's vision is not looking toward the future but, rather, looking at the present moment, at this place, which happens to be like somebody's fading memory of a town.

The grammatical expression of the prophetic loop-time is future perfect (or future anterior) as opposed to plain future. Future perfect is a verb form used to describe an event that is expected to happen before a time of reference in the future: it is a tense that talks about the present moment as something that *will have been*. Leaving the coroner's laboratory, Cohle speaks about a town that *will have been* a town. And driving through the disaster-stricken landscape of south Louisiana, he sees a place that *will have been* above the surface.

In these examples, the prophetic mode is characterized by what might be termed a *catastrophic* future perfect, a subcategory of future perfect in which the future time of reference is a disaster. In the words of Maurice Blanchot, prophetic speech is not just a language that speaks of certain events to come, but a language that enters into complicated relationships with time:

“prophetic speech announces an impossible future, or makes the future it announces, because it announces it, something impossible, a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence. When speech becomes prophetic, it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence. Even the Eternal City and the indestructible Temple are all of a sudden—unbelievably—destroyed.” (Blanchot 2003, 79)

The catastrophic future perfect is not a mere prediction of future moments, for instance the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. Rather, it is a destruction of the present moment through seeing it in the light of a future made impossible by disaster, a future “given over to the fire” (81). By making a temporal rebound on the coming catastrophe, this aesthetic mode undermines any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence.

Carcosa, the name to the sex cult's mythical headquarters where Hart and Cohle find and kill the murder of Dora Lange, Errol Childress, in the showdown in the eighth episode, is taken from “An Inhabitant of Carcosa,” a short story written by the 19th century horror writer Ambrose Bierce. More importantly, however, the prophetic loop-time of *True Detective* also corresponds to the temporal structure of Bierce's short story. The narrator, the eponymous inhabitant of Carcosa, is attacked by a violent fever and wakes up in a bleak and desolate burial-ground covered with a tall overgrowth of sere grass. Under the root of a tree he finds a decayed gravestone with his own name and the dates of his birth and death on it (Bierce 1903). As he realizes, he has become a ghost lingering on in a post-apocalyptic future among the ruins of his ancient home city: he has made a mental projection to a moment following a future catastrophe and is now looking back toward the present time.

In a wider historical horizon, the catastrophic future perfect of *True Detective* also corresponds with the temporal structure of the prophetic books of

the Old testament. If Cohle predicts a future situation in which the town is taken back by the jungle, the Hebrew prophets predict future situations in which Jewish society is taken back by the desert. Like Cohle, the Hebrew prophets interpreted the present moment in the light of future disasters: they saw the present social life as a life that *will have been* sinful when Jerusalem is turned into a heap of ruins and a lair of jackals (Jer 9,11).

In general, prophets often spoke about secret layers of reality rather than about future realities. The Old testament word for prophet, *nabi*, simply means somebody who is called or summoned. The common and erroneous understanding of the prophet as merely a predictor is imported from the Greek word *prophētes*, but this word, too, means ‘proclaimer’ or ‘speaker,’ and not necessarily someone who speaks about the future. As mentioned above, Cohle’s prophetic visions do not turn him into a traditional religious prophet. Nor do they turn him into a modern technological prophet, a meteorologist or a risk manager who has the capacity to predict the exact date and size of the next hurricane to make landfall in south Louisiana. Rather, he is a detective who interprets the question of justice in the light of an impending future disaster.

By describing the aesthetic mode of *True Detective* as prophetic, I am claiming that the temporal loop of the catastrophic future perfect defines the show’s way of representing the fictional world of south Louisiana. A conspicuous example of this is the narrative structure of the first season. The first five episodes of the show are organized by constant flashbacks and flashforwards between the original investigation in 1995 and the re-investigation in 2012. In the 1995 scenes, we meet Hart and Cohle as young police officers in great shape; in the 2012 scenes, however, we see them as worn-down and alcoholic ex-detectives. This temporal loop of the frame story highlights a unusually brutal aging process, thereby posing a question about the nameless disaster which, in the time-span between 1995 and 2012, transformed the two young professionals into middle-aged wrecks. Thus, thanks to the narrative structure of the show, the viewer of the show experiences the young Hart and Cohle as men who are going to be under the influence of alcoholism and old age within seventeen years.

The predicament of justice

A hundred years ago, the sociologist Max Weber suggested an interpretation of the Old testament prophets as social critics rather than as predictors. In *Ancient Judaism*, originally published in 1917–19, Weber famously described the Jewish prophets as “world-political demagogues and publicists” (1952, 275). As demagogues and publicists, the prophets addressed the question of justice in the light of future disasters. [2] On the one hand, they never tired of charging the rich and mighty for their unjust treatment of the oppressed, the fatherless, and the widows; on the other hand, they obsessively visualized disasters such as invasions, plagues, earthquakes, draughts, epidemics, and invasions of locusts.

Incidentally, this characteristic prophetic mix of justice and disaster has historical backgrounds. Hebrew prophecy took shape in a relatively short

[2] Since Weber, this approach has been taken up by a number of scholars, among others by Abraham Joshua Heschel, André Neher, Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Blanchot and, most recently, the American philosopher Michael Walzer, according to whom “what makes prophecy truly significant is not the oracle, the military forecast, but the moral admonition [...] The prophet is less foreteller than censor.” (Walzer 2012, 78)

historical period during the eighth and seventh century BC, a period in which the nomadic tribes had settled in the growing cities of the two Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judaea, thereby creating greater and greater inequalities between the upper classes around the court and the lower classes outside the court. In the same period, the small Jewish kingdoms were haunted by disastrous attacks by neighboring superpowers, ending with the fall of the Israel in 722 BC and Judah in 586 BC.

In order to understand how the prophets perceived the question of justice in the light of coming catastrophe, I will take a cue from Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets* (1962): "The distinction of the prophets was in their remorseless unveiling of injustice and oppression, in their comprehension of social, political, and religious evils. They were not concerned with the definition, but with the predicament, of justice, with the fact that those called upon to apply it defied it" (1962, 260). Unfortunately, Heschel does not expand on the important distinction between the definition and the predicament of justice, but what he means by this can I think be conceptualized by the distinction between the content and the force of law.

On the one hand, the prophets were unconcerned with the definition of justice, Heschel writes. They did not discuss the meaning of the principles that guided the practice of justice of their time. In the vocabulary of contemporary legal philosophy, the prophets' lack of concern with the definition of justice can be conceptualized as a disinterest in the *content of law*. Weber describes the prophets as "world-political demagogues and publicists," but hastens to add: "however, subjectively they were no political partisans. Primarily they pursued no political interests. Prophecy has never declared anything about a 'best state.'" The prophets were radicals and extremists in their efforts to unveil injustice and oppression, but they were not revolutionaries and reformists formulating the alternative normative ideals of a good state. They never suggested new laws or changes of old laws, they never created political or social movements, they never made efforts to organize their audience, they rarely counseled their kings, and they rarely discussed the content of the positive laws of the two Jewish kingdoms.

On the other hand, the prophets were concerned with the predicament of justice. A predicament is an external difficulty, an unpleasant situation in which you can be, in this case an unpleasant situation in which justice finds itself due to the fact "that those called upon to apply it defied it," as Heschel writes. After having settled in the big cities of the fat and fertile Canaan, the nomadic Jewish people had begun to forget their covenant with each other and with God. However, as the force of the covenant started to wane, the empty space filled up with foreign laws and habits. The prophets constantly denounced how their fellow countrymen now worshipped Ba'al and the idols of the neighboring tribes, how they slept with temple prostitutes, how they sacrificed their children, and how they made burnt offerings on the tops of the mountains. The Jewish people were becoming impermeable to the force of law: they were impudent, godless, hypocritical, and stubborn (Ez 2,3), they had hearts of stone (Ez 36,36); and they turned their back and not their face toward God (Jer 32,33).

In the terms of legal philosophy, this predicament of justice can be approached by the concept of the *force of law*, a concept denoting law's capacity to apply itself to the world outside the legal system. In "The Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" an influential essay from 1990, Jacques Derrida discusses the force of law as one of law's defining features: "Applicability, 'enforceability,' is not an exterior or secondary possibility that may or may not be added as a supplement to law. It is the force essentially implied in the very concept of *justice as law* (*droit*), of justice as it becomes *droit*, of the law as '*droit*' [...] The word 'enforceability' reminds us that there is no such thing as law (*droit*) that doesn't imply *in itself, a priori, in the analytic structure of its concept*, the possibility of being 'enforced,' applied by force" (Derrida 1990, 924). Less well-known is Robert Cover's 1986 article "Violence and the Word" in which he defines the violence of the law as law's coercive shadow. According to Cover, legal interpretation is distinguished from the interpretation of literature, from political philosophy, and from constitutional criticism by the coercive violence that ensures the "embedding of an understanding of political text in institutional modes of action" (Cover 1986, 1601).

The question of the force of law is a question about the relation between law and its other: the "natural" and formless life to which law cannot be applied. When the prophets denounced their fellow countrymen as stubborn, godless and stone-hearted, they pointed in the direction of a zone outside the pale of law. According to the contemporary German philosopher Christoph Menke, building, among others, on Derrida and Cover, the problem of law-enforcement can be divided into two distinct problems: the problem is "how to enforce the law not only against one who is unjust, but also against one who is non-just—against one who stands outside, and is alien to, the justice of the law" (Menke 2011, 37). When law is enforced against the unjust (*gegen den Ungerechten*), i.e. against the criminal person within the confines of the legal order, it is dealing with the well-known problem of illegality. But when law is enforced against the non-just (*gegen den Nicht-Gerechten*), i.e. against a human being who is alien to the law, who turns the back toward law, it is threatened by the zone of non-legality or extra-legality. In the perspective of the Hebrew prophets, their fellow countrymen were not unjust but, rather, non-just: their breaches of law were acts of apostasy and not mere acts of crime.

According to the Old testament prophets, the only solution to the predicament of justice was a "turning back," a *teshuvah*, to a reinforced and re-energized version of the covenant. On rare occasions the prophets actually spoke about a new law, but then their concern was not what should be written in the new law but, rather, *how* the new law should be written: in order to buttress applicability and enforceability the law should be written in the very heart of the Jewish people and not just on fragile stone tablets (Jer 31:33).

Detectives and prophets

At the very beginning of the first episode of *True Detective*, Detectives Hart and Cohle examine the body of Dora Lange found in front of a lonely tree in a cornfield. Kneeling in a prayer-like position, she is naked except for a pair of

deer antlers, a blindfold and, on her back, a spiral shaped symbol about the size of a fist. This tattoo-like symbol keeps coming back during the eight episodes of the show on dead bodies, on buildings, and on criminals, contributing to the larger pattern of the sex cult. Remarkably, however, the spiral symbol has the shape of a hurricane. This is emphasized in the second episode when Cohle explains Gilbough and Papania how it felt to be mainlining the secret truth of the universe (E2 56). While Cohle off-camera describes his chemical flashbacks, the viewer watches another prophetic vision on the screen: a large flock of starlings that form another spiral symbol in the sky (E2 56). In other words, the symbol on Dora Lange's back can be interpreted in two different ways: whereas a detective would interpret the symbol as a clue about a past crime, a prophet would interpret it as an omen of a future disaster.

As we saw, Jean-Pierre Dupuy defined the prophetic as an interpretative attitude, a way of viewing the world. In the examination of Dora Lange, and in *True Detective* in general, the interpretative attitude of the prophet meets the interpretative attitude of the detective. Both models of semiotic interpretation, both heuristics, can be the bearer of an entire aesthetic mode, in the case of the detective story even an entire genre.

In many ways, the interpretative attitudes of the detective and of the prophet are closely related. As Hart tells Gilbough and Papania, "Rust had about as sharp an eye for weakness as I ever seen" (E2 27), and this sharp eye is, at the same time, the eye of a detective and the eye of a prophet. Both eyes are directed toward the gap between law and its other. In his recent *Mysteries & Conspiracies*, Luc Boltanski explores the detective story and the spy novel as bearers of an interpretative attitude, a historically specific "way of envisaging reality" (Boltanski 2014, 33). According to Boltanski, the investigation is provoked by a gap between a given political order and the real world outside this order. The detective story and the spy novel "exploit a fundamental contradiction of the state form in its relation to reality" (31). Thus, the investigation can be characterized as an "operation of unveiling that sets an apparent but fictitious reality and a hidden but real reality side by side, on the same level" (13).

Boltanski's formulations apply to the heuristics of the prophet as well as to the heuristics of the detective: both interpretations of signs and symbols endeavor to unveil the secret truth of the universe. In episode one, when Billy Lee Tuttle shows up at the Vermilion Parish Sheriff Department in order to influence the police investigation of the cult, he addresses himself specifically to Hart and Cohle: "I don't need to tell men in your positions, but there is a war happening behind things" (E1 48). It goes for men in the position of police officers as well as for men in the position of foretellers that their job is to reveal the unseen.

However, there also seems to be a conflict between the interpretative attitudes of the detective and of the prophet. "Stop saying shit like that. It's unprofessional," Hart replies to Cohle's remark about the place outside the coroner's laboratory being like somebody's memory of a town. This conflict between heuristics stems from the fact that the detective and the prophet unveil two different kinds of secret truth. In other words, the concept of

truth in *True Detective* is double: in the terminology suggested above, the word “true” refers to the truth about the unjust as well as to the truth about the non-just. On the one hand, the detective has a sharp eye for normative weakness understood as *illegality*; on the other hand, the prophet has a sharp eye for normative weakness understood as *non-legality*.

Apart from Cohle and, to a certain degree, Hart, the police officers at the Vermilion Parish Sheriff Department agree on perceiving the murder of Dora Lange as an individual crime. As soon as Hart and Cohle nail the unjust person behind the illegality—when they shoot and kill the supposed killer Reggie Ledoux at the end of episode four—the social order is restored and everything falls back into place. In Boltanski’s words, the detective story is conservative in nature because it ends up closing the gap between the social order and its other by “attributing the criminal event to a criminal entity” (31).

Many interpretations of *True Detective* focus on how Cohle’s philosophical pessimism, a bleak understanding of the world reminiscent of Arthur Schopenhauer and Thomas Ligotti, “is expressed in his suspicion toward institutions—the police department, organized religion—and toward the narratives people build around themselves” (Patches 2014; Shipley 2014). It is important to note, however, that Cohle’s pessimistic realism does not make him give up the ideal of justice. If he is suspicious toward the police department, it is because it is not honoring the ideal of justice. As opposed to his colleagues at the department, Cohle interprets the murder case not as an individual unjust act but, rather, a symptom of a general predicament of justice. In violation of the instructions of the sheriff, he sets out to investigate the Christian ministry magnate Billy Lee Tuttle, the presumed leader of the sex cult who also happens to be the cousin of Louisiana governor Edwin Tuttle. The show even hints that the other police officers are even controlled by the Tuttle family, something that might explain their reluctance to enforce the law when it comes to the disappearance of women and children along the coast. Seen with Cohle’s sharp eye for weakness, the *whodunnit* of a single murder becomes a denunciation of a whole state.

In the first episode of the show, when Hart and Cohle examine the naked body of Dora Lange in the cornfield, Cohle has an early premonition of this: “This kind of thing does not happen in a vacuum” (E1 12). At the end of the show, Cohle’s initial premonition has turned into a hard-won experience: “Now I don’t know the sprawl of this thing, right? The people I’m after they’re all fucking over. They’re in a lot of different things. Pieces. Family trees” (E7 4). It is Cohle’s sense of the sprawl of this thing that urges him to reopen the case when learning that Reggie Ledoux was in fact not the killer of Dora Lange.

During the examination of Dora Lange’s body in the cornfield, Hart, too, comments upon the sprawling non-legality that undermines the legal system of Vermilion Parish. His off-camera voice sets out to explain why the police officers who were called upon to apply justice defied it. According to Hart, the officers had problems with authority: “A lot of it had to do with how they managed authority. There can be a burden in authority, in vigilance, like a father’s burden. It was too much for some men. A smart guy who’s steady is hard to find. I was all right, better than some, but, you know, I knew how

to talk to people, and I was steady” (E1 8). In the context of this article, authority can be defined as a legitimate force of law enabling officials to enforce law. Apparently, however, this legal authority is a heavy burden for some men—including Hart, who calls himself steady but fails miserably as a police officer and as a father. It seems as if it is somehow burdensome for the authority figures to function as vessels of the force of law, and that this mismanagement of authority is the reason for the breakdown of the legal order in south Louisiana.

When Hart claims that there can be “a burden in authority now,” he addresses the question of the waning of the force of law directly. However, in *True Detective* the impotence is not only present at the thematic level but also at a formal level. One example of this is the show’s remarkable use of voice-over. In general, the characters tend to talk about rules and norms—about having authority, about keeping promises, about being a decent and loyal person, about the sanctity of human life—but often the off-camera normative talk clashes with the visuals on the screen. This is especially the case for detective Hart, even if he is keen on posing as a steady and all right man, or at least as a man who is better than some men.

In episode three, Hart continues his self-characterization as a steady man in an off-stage comment to Detectives Gilbough and Papania: “The rest of us had families, people in our lives, good things, people give you rules, rules describe the shape of things” (E3, 37). Meanwhile, on the screen, we see Hart arriving drunk at his mistress’ house to beat up a rival in a social reality where normative laws and rules do in no way describe the shape of things. In episode five, Hart and Cohle give testimony to an investigative board about their killing of the presumed murderer of Dora Lange. “I can say that I walked away from the experience with a greater respect for the sanctity of human life. Yeah,” Cohle explains off-camera (E5 17). Meanwhile, the visuals show how the two detectives illegitimately and revengefully kill the suspect. In this kind of schizophrenic voice-over, the off-camera voice cite the fading laws that no longer have the force to penetrate the extra-legal world on the screen.

Ba’al and fairy tales

With the force of the legal rules waning, a variety of other rules and norms fill up the space. In *True Detective*, the sex cult, a mixture of Lovecraft, voodoo and Santería, functions as a modernized version of the Old testament Ba’al cult. Like the Canaanite Ba’al cult, the Carcosa sex cult makes burnt offerings and sacrifices children: “They sacrifice kids and what not,” one of the witnesses reports (E4 3). A similar role is played by evangelical Christianity which is pictured as a kind of *ersatz* normativity filling the vacuum left behind by the legal and moral norms of the political community.

In the beginning of the third episode, Detectives Hart and Cohle have followed the trail of Dora Lange to religious community, the Revival Ministry Church, where they attend a service in a tent. Like the camera, the conversation of the two detectives focuses on the people assembled in the tent rather

than on the sermon held by the ecstatic pastor Joel Theriot. Whereas Hart, characteristically, regards the congregation with sympathy, Cohle, the pessimist, is suspicious toward the institution of organized religion: “I see a propensity for obesity. Poverty. A yen for fairy tales. Folks puttin’ what few bucks they do have into a little wicker basket being passed around. I think it’s safe to say nobody here’s gonna be splitting the atom” (E3 5). Thereafter, Hart and Cohle go on to discuss how to establish a social order in a group of people who have a yen for fairy tales:

Hart: Some folks enjoy community. A common good.

Cohle: Yeah, well if the common good’s gotta make up fairy tales then it’s not good for anybody. [...]

Hart: I mean, can you imagine if people didn’t believe, what things they’d get up to?

Cohle: Exact same thing they do now. Just out in the open.

Hart: Bullshit. It’d be a fucking freak show of murder and debauchery and you know it.

Cohle: If the only thing keeping a person decent is the expectation of divine reward, then brother that person is a piece of shit; and I’d like to get as many of them out in the open as possible.

Hart: Well, I guess your judgment is infallible, piece-of-shit-wise. You think that notebook is a stone tablet?

Cohle: What’s it say about life, hmm? You gotta get together, tell yourself stories that violate every law of the universe just to get through the god damn day. Nah. What’s that say about your reality, Marty?

Even if Christian belief plays an important role in this cantankerous conversation, Hart and Cohle do not discuss belief as a religious faith but, rather, as a kind of normativity, as an institution that can keep a person decent. Had it not been for the Christian promise of divine reward, this community would turn into a lawless and normless chaos, “a fucking freak show of murder and debauchery,” Hart maintains. Without the Christian fairy tale, every person in the tent church would be a “piece of shit,” Cohle adds. However, Hart and Cohle disagree about the fairy tale kind of normativity supplied by Christianity: Hart wishes the people to stay decent, even if it takes the *ersatz* normativity of Christianity; Cohle wants to get as many of the pieces of shit “out in the open as possible.”

In Hart’s terse words, the Old testament prophets passed “piece-of-shit-wise” judgments when denouncing their fellow citizens as stubborn, stone-hearted, and godless and as following the norms of the Canaanite Ba’al cult rather than obeying the laws of the political community. In this context, a piece of shit is a human being who is impermeable to the force of law that can keep a person decent. He or she is not among the folks that “enjoy community,” but, rather, an alien to the justice of the law, as Menke wrote. We

should note that Cohle's piece-of-shit-wise judgment is not at judgment that applies a specific law to a specific human being; it is, rather, a judgment about the very applicability of laws. Getting as many of the non-legal pieces of shit out in the open as possible, then, is to perform the fundamental prophetic task of unveiling the hypocrisy of the existing social order: "What's that say about your reality, Marty?"

[3] "I am the LORD your God/ from the land of Egypt;/ I will again make you dwell in tents,/ as in the days of the appointed feast." (Hos 12,9)

The constitutional moment

"You think that notebook is a stone tablet?" Hart asked at the end of the two detectives' discussion in the tent church. The question refers to Cohle's big black notebook which has played a conspicuous role in the earlier episodes. At the beginning of episode one, Hart tells Gilbough and Papania that the officers at the Sheriff Department used to call Cohle 'The Taxman' because of this notebook: "The rest of us had these little note pads or something. He had this big ledger. Looked funny walking door to door with it like the tax man, which ain't bad as far as nicknames go" (E1 7). In episode three, when Hart refers to the notebook as a stone tablet, he ironically turns Cohle the taxman into Cohle the lawgiver, a modern day Moses descending from Mount Sinai carrying the stone tablets of the law. Whereas a taxman is maintaining a given social order, a lawgiver is creating a new social order by turning a crowd of pre-political human beings into a political community. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's words, Moses made the astounding deed of transforming a herd of wretched fugitives into "a body politic, a free people" (Rousseau 1972, 6).

The constitution of the Jewish people at the foot of Mount Sinai is a frequent theme in the prophetic books of the Old testament. [3] In other words, there is an interesting connection between, on the one hand, the prophets' looking forward toward the catastrophic moment in the future and, on the other, the prophets' looking backward toward the constitutional moment in the past. The *teshuvah* of the prophets, their wished-for "turning back," is also a return from the city to the desert.

According to Blanchot, one can find a similar connection between the future catastrophic moment and the past constitutional moment in the aesthetic mode of the prophetic (which he calls the "prophetic speech"): "Even the Eternal City and the indestructible Temple are all of a sudden—unbelievably—destroyed. It is once again like the desert, and speech also is desert-like, this voice that needs the desert to cry out and that endlessly awakens in us the terror, understanding, and memory of the desert" (2003, 79). Interestingly, Blanchot describes the prophetic undermining of the present moment as an event that opens a vista from the well-ordered space of the city to the extra-legal space of the desert: when speech becomes "desert-like" (*désertique*), social life looks as if it was "once again like the desert." In the last sentence of the quotation, Blanchot writes that this way of speaking awakens in us not just terror and memory of the desert, but also *l'entente*, a French word that can be translated by "understanding," but which also by "agreement," "alliance" and even "covenant." A page further down, Blanchot expands on the relation between the desert and the constitutional moment by defining the desert as

“that place without place where alone the Covenant can be concluded and to which one must always turn as to that moment of nakedness and separation that is at the origin of just existence [*de l'existence juste*].” (2003, 80, translation modified) If we follow Blanchot, then, one of the defining features of the prophetic mode is that the return to the desert is also a return to the origin of justice and law, i.e. to the re-constitution of the covenant. [4]

By calling the notebook a stone tablet, Hart stylizes Cohle as a Moses figure. In episode two, Hart asks Cohle about their unsystematic police investigation, brought forward only by blind accidents: “Do you have a specific location for that place, or do we just have to wander around until we find it?” (E2 24). If we insist on following this biblical allusion, the two detectives are wandering aimlessly about in the desert just like the Jewish people did before reaching Canaan. This brief biblical allusion is supported by Cohle’s nomadic life that led him to Alaska and Texas before returning to the state of Louisiana. To be sure, Hart is deeply sarcastic in both these allusions to the Pentateuch. At another occasion, Hart mockingly nicknames his partner “Mr. Charisma” (E3 5). Dressing up Cohle as a nomadic and charismatic Moses is a way of ridiculing his annoying moral righteousness. Nevertheless, if we interpret Hart’s sarcasm in the light of the prophetic books and of Blanchot’s essay on prophetic speech, the sarcasm might also hide an important insight into the prophetic mode in *True Detective*. If the fading laws of south Louisiana should finally break down, if people should finally turn into pieces of shit “out in the open,” it would be “a fucking freak show of murder and debauchery,” Hart asserts. However, this moment of non-legality—in Blanchot’s word a “moment of nakedness and separation”—is also, potentially, the constitutional moment in which a new covenant could be instituted. According to Derrida, the performative force of law was present in “the very emergence of justice and law, the founding and justifying moment that institutes law.” (1990, 941)

When Detectives Gilbough and Papania happen to ask the murderer Errol Childress for directions in episode seven, he explains his local knowledge: “I know the whole coast” (E7 50). After they have driven away he ominously refers to the original and indigenous character of the Tuttle family, in which he is an illegitimate son: “My family’s been here a long, long time.” In the perspective of legal philosophy, a defining dichotomy of *True Detective*, then, is the conflict between the nomadic and the sedentary, between the force of law and the power of tradition, between the momentary emergence of justice and law and the “long, long time” of pre-political norms and habits.

This conflict perhaps explains the choice of location for Carcosa, the mythical headquarters of the sex-cult and the place of the showdown with Errol Childress in the last episode of the show. On the real map of Louisiana, the scenes at Carcosa are shot in the ruins of Fort Macomb, a stronghold built in 1822 as a defense against the British invasion of Louisiana and later re-used by both Confederate and Union forces during the Civil War. The historical Fort Macomb thus had a part to play in the two conflicts that more than any other conflicts defined the United States. Thus, returning to Fort Macomb is the modern Louisiana version of returning to the desert where the covenant was made. Yet the location of the foundational moment is contaminated.

[4] In the words of Francis Landy, commenting on Blanchot’s essay: “So the prophetic word survives and looks beyond the destruction of the foundations of Israel’s existence, what Israelites would have conceived of as an end, the point beyond which there is no future. But it is also a looking backward, a reversion to the foundational voice of Israel’s existence.” (Landy 2013, 357)

During the “long, long time” of tradition, the corridors of the fort have become stuffed with vegetation, mysterious symbols, and embalmed bodies of murder victims. It takes the extra-legal force of Hart and Cohle, at this late moment acting as ex-police, to clean up the site of the political constitution.

This isn't that kind of world

In a recent interview, the author of *True Detective*, Nic Pizzolatto, comments on the waning of the force of law in the show. Referring to a horrendous snuff video from one of the rituals of the sex cult, Pizzolatto expands on a conversation between Hart and Cohle at the very end of the final episode:

“I think it would have rang false to have Hart and Cohle suddenly clean up 50 years of the culture history that led to Errol Childress, or to get all the men in that video. It's important to me, I think, that Cohle says, “We didn't get em all, Marty,” and Marty says, “We ain't going to. This isn't that kind of world.” This isn't the kind of world where you mop up everything. We discharged our duty, but of course there are levels and wheels and historical contexts to what happened that we'll never be able to touch.” (Sepinwall 2014)

The traditional detective story plays in the kind of world where you mop up everything. This is why the inquiry of the detective is able to close the gap between the law and its other by attributing the injustice to a small number of criminals that can be put to jail at the end of the story. Eventually, when everything is mopped up, social order is restored. It's important to Pizzolatto, however, that *True Detective* does not play in the well-ordered world of the classical detective story. This is the reason why Hart and Cohle are unable to get all the men on the snuff video. The world of the fictional Vermilion Parish is a kind of world where the force of law is waning. In this kind of world, law's other is not just a handful of illegal individuals but, rather, an entire zone of non-legality which the agents of law will never be able to clean up or to even touch. In Pizzolatto's words, the extra-legal zone is made up by “50 years of the culture history” and by “levels and wheels and historical contexts.” Justice as law cannot be enforced on this state-wide machinery of non-legality.

In this article, I have explored the connection between a way of seeing the world and a kind of world. Put in more general terms, this a connection between aesthetics and justice. On the one hand, the prophetic is an aesthetic mode: a certain way of seeing the fictional world in the shadow of the coming catastrophe. On the other hand, the waning force of law is a predicament of justice: a certain kind of world in which an unbridgeable gap has opened up between law and its other.

Seen in the context of contemporary disaster research, the aesthetic mode of the prophetic is a subset of what might be termed the disaster imaginary: the collective repertoire of disaster-related images, narratives, genres, styles, and modes. It is important to note that this vast cultural arsenal is not just made up by representations of disasters. In sociological disaster research, the

disaster imaginary is studied as “disaster myths,” i.e. as “distorted images” of disaster stricken communities (Fischer 1994; Tierney et al. 2006). But the disaster imaginary not only frames our perception of disasters, it also frames our perception of an entire world. This is one of the advantages with Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s concept of “enlightened doomsaying.” According to Dupuy, the prophet of doom is predicting the coming disaster but, first of all, the prophet is interpreting the present moment in the light of the future disaster. In *Petite métaphysique des tsunamis* (2005), this interpretative attitude is described as a certain kind of “self-awareness,” a *conscience de soi* to which humanity gets access “in the very moment when its survival is in question” (Dupuy 2005, 107).

This shift of methodological perspective on the disaster imaginary plays an important role in recent disaster research. To name only a handful of prominent examples, the Cold War historian Joseph Masco has explored how the American nuclear imaginary, “a specific set of ideas and images of collective danger,” framed the perception of American society during the Cold War, and frames the question of security today (Masco 2014). The affect theorist Ben Anderson has investigated how contemporary disaster exercises generate an affective atmosphere of urgency that offers a specific “problematization” of social life (Anderson/Adey 2012). The anthropologist Didier Fassin has shown how contemporary humanitarianism is based on a “discourse of catastrophe” that determines how social worlds are morally interpreted (Fassin 2012, 286). And the political philosophers Brad Evans and Julian Reid critique how “the catastrophic imaginaries of late liberal rule” make us perceive the world as a depoliticized field of necessity and fate (Evans/Reid, xiii).

In these methodological approaches, disaster is not the *object* of a given disaster imaginary. Instead, the disaster is the *optics* through which other fields of social life are made visible and thinkable. Likewise, in this article, I have explored disaster as an optics in rather than as an object of *True Detective*. My aim has not been to describe the show as a representation of disaster, a re-run of the well-known forms and figures of the Hollywood disaster movie. Rather, I have focused on the show as a representation of justice seen in the shadow of the coming catastrophe. Thanks to the aesthetic mode of the prophetic, the show poses the question of the force of law: a question not of the content of law but of the enforceability or applicability of legal norms to the zone of non-legal life. If we take the liberty of combining a remark by Cohle and a remark by Hart, the show demonstrates that a place that is going to be under water within thirty years isn’t the kind of place where you mop up everything.

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